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BARON STIEGEL AND AMERICAN GLASS

ON August 31, 1750, the ship *Nancy*, Thomas Coatham, master, sailing from Rotterdam and calling at Cowes, Isle of Wight, landed at the port of Philadelphia in the then Province of Pennsylvania with 270 emigrants. Among these was a youth of twenty-one, born near the ancient Rhine city of Cologne where glass had been made since the days of the Romans, who was to become one of the pioneer flint glass manufacturers of America and who, by his good taste, aesthetic enthusiasm, versatile energy, and the prestige of his personality, was destined to bring contemporary recognition and ultimate fame to the early glass manufactured in the colonies. He signed the ship's roster as Heinrich Wil. Stiegel.

From Philadelphia Stiegel made his way to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and here, on November 7, 1752, he married Elizabeth Huber, daughter of Jacob Huber of Brickerville and owner of one of the oldest iron furnaces in the state, after which he built a house near the Falls of the Schuylkill in the city of Philadelphia. In the latter part of 1757 he purchased an interest in the Brickerville plant and named it Elizabeth Furnace in honor of his wife, immediately tearing down the old building and erecting a more commodious one at or near the same site. And here, having once started as an iron master, he soon made a name for himself. At first he specialized in stoves, which he found profitable; and he improved his early models until the celebrated ten plate "Baron Stiegel" wood stove was given to the community. He also perfected the Benjamin Franklin open hearth, making a complete stove of it. And later on he branched out into the making of all kinds of castings and even specialized in sugar planters' and refiners' castings for the West India trade.

He was also branching out in other ways. On February 7, 1762, Charles and Alexander Stedman, the famous merchants of Philadelphia, purchased, in Lancaster County, 729 acres of land which included the then small settlement of Manheim.

During the month of September of the same year Stiegel bought a third interest in this holding, and a co-partnership, under the style and title of "The Stiegel Company," was formed that eventually controlled over 11,000 acres of the finest mineral land in Pennsylvania. And then, too — perhaps some old glass blower of Cologne had first planted the desire in the boy's brain — he was determined to be known as a glass manufacturer as well as an iron master. Indeed, he was soon so describing himself, preferring the designation to the "iron master" of earlier deeds. And the account books of Charming Forge, one of his iron enterprises, show that he drew money for a trip to England (1763-1764), where he visited Bristol and engaged English as well as German glass blowers to come to Pennsylvania.

The experimental stages of his glass manufacturing were carried out at Brickerville between 1763 and 1765, while the large Manheim factory was in course of construction, the bricks being imported from England and hauled from Philadelphia to Manheim via Lancaster in Conastoga wagons. And while the Brickerville product in no way rivaled the beautiful and artistic output of the larger works, both the open and the closed pot furnace were in use there; and it was doubtless to the Brickerville hollow ware and bottles that reference was made when, in 1768, the fastidious Benjamin Franklin, writing from London to his natural son, William Franklin, then Governor of the Province of New Jersey, where the Wistar glass works were in operation, called his attention to the statement of Governor John Penn, of the Province of Pennsylvania, in his report to the crown, that "there is a glass house in Lancaster County, but it makes only a little coarse ware for the country neighbors."

The Wistar works had been established at Wistarberg, near Allowaystown, in Salem County, South Jersey, by Casper Wistar in 1739; and continued in operation under the founder's son Richard Wistar until 1781. They were the only local rivals worth Stiegel's consideration; and they turned out an excellent general



ENAMELED, ETCHED, AND PLAIN GLASS
BY BARON STIEGEL

quality, as well as some very beautiful specimens, of glass. But the factory had been started with the aid of Dutch blowers from Rotterdam, and even after the advent of German workmen, its finished products showed the heavy treatment of the Dutch style. And Stiegel, determined at all costs to excel, met the conditions that faced him by a working combination between skilled German blowers and the far-famed Bristol workmen.

Stiegel's Manheim works were completed in 1765 and Manheim, originally surveyed by Thomas Lincoln, Surveyor, and re-surveyed in 1762 by Stiegel himself, grew rapidly. The factory's wares found markets in Lancaster, York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, in which latter place the products of the establishment were eagerly sought after and much appreciated. In 1770 Stiegel purchased the Stedman brothers' interests from Isaac Cox of Philadelphia and became sole owner. The town prospered. The Glass Works alone employed thirty-five blowers. The factory became a splendid investment and brought wealth and fame to its founder. Stiegel, in writing to a friend, said it brought him an income of £5,000.

And now were laid the foundations for those legends of magnificent idiosyncrasy and spectacular extravagance that were later to cluster about Stiegel's name and, for a time, to constitute his chief apparent claim to fame. What American child has not been told the story of the carriage drawn by eight white horses in which he traveled from one to another of his estates; of the outriders and couriers that accompanied it; of the pack of hounds that preceded the cavalcade; of the cannon that heralded its approach, and of the sumptuous banquet that welcomed it at its destination? He became known throughout the Colonies as "the eccentric Baron."

But his fame was destined to rest on something more stable than eccentricity. The Manheim works turned out a fine grade of window glass, sheet glass, bottles of all sorts, funnels, water lenses (for use as lamp reflectors), barometer tubes, retorts and general druggists' and chemists' specialties, flasks, measures, drinking

glasses, tumblers, flips, rummers, salt cellars, pepper cruets, sugar bowls, creamers, pitchers, dishes, bowls, vases, scent bottles, and toys. It turned out "cotton stem" wine glasses which rivaled the famous Bristol examples. It made all these things in flint (so-called "white" or colorless) glass; and some of them in light green, deep emerald, olive, wine, amethyst, and blue — the latter, being the favorite color of the German emigrant, predominating. It also made flint articles "flashed" with a thin coating of opaque white, and various articles variously bi-colored — flint and blue, blue and opaque white, and flint and amethyst. Moreover, skilled engravers and enamellers were employed, rivaling the Dutch, German, Swiss, and Bristol workmen; and enameled mugs, steins, glasses, and cordial bottles were produced, as well as engraved bottles, glasses, and flips. The aesthetic enthusiasm of the owner seems to have communicated itself to his workmen and the costlier and more decorative output of the establishment ran rapidly up a steep incline toward distinction.

A few of the distinguishing characteristics of Stiegel Glass, over and above the high structural tension and resultant resonance and brittleness characteristic of all early flint glass, are a nice taste and discrimination in the use of essentially beautiful and artistic patterns, a sound sense of form and a consistent adherence to pure lines in the designing of its shapes, a general lightness of weight and a habitual thinness of texture a beautiful brilliancy of surface and a remarkable uniformity of color; and finally, a quality difficult to define, yet once found never to be mistaken or misprized, a quality especially noticeable in those endlessly varying individual specimens of a few characteristic shapes and decorations, where the condensed pattern was impressed upon the glass in a small pattern-mold and the article then blown by hand in the open air, a quality that it is perhaps only possible here to call the Spirit of the Handmade in its distinguishing Stiegel incarnation. Measured by the forceps, these hand-blown pieces are all asymmetrical; measured

by the subtler micrometer of our responsiveness to vitality and beauty, many of them approach perfection.

But though his ultimate place in American history was not to be conditioned by his eccentricities or his lavishness, his personal downfall was due to them. In the latter part of October, 1774, his widespread campaign of acquiring real estate with borrowed capital resulted in financial failure and he was imprisoned for debt. By a special act of the Pennsylvania legislature passed on the 24th of December of that year, signed at two o'clock of the afternoon of the same day by Governor John Penn, referred for consideration by the King in Council on July 21, 1775, and allowed to become a law by lapse of time in accordance with the proprietary character, he was released, stripped of all his wealth. And Robert Coleman, who had rented the Brickerville plant for seven years at an annual rental of £450, appointed

him — at once an act of kindness and an irony of fate — foreman of Elizabeth Furnace.

Here, through his friendship with the Hon. Jasper Yeates of Lancaster, Stiegel procured munition orders for the Continental army which kept the furnace busy night and day. But in the latter part of 1778, the seat of war having moved to the south, these orders ceased and Stiegel found himself not only out of employment, but penniless. And henceforward, by preaching, giving music lessons, and teaching school this once refulgent figure and spectacular financier just managed to maintain a bare existence.

The beginnings of the manufacture of glass are shrouded in impenetrable obscurity. And the end of Baron Stiegel is like the beginnings of the art he loved: his body lies in an unknown grave.

F. W. HUNTER.

